

Choices of Visual Urban Spaces: The Binary Turns of Class Discourses in Contemporary “Chinese Urban Cinema” since 1990s

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Abstract:

This paper aims to explore the urban space and the discursive transformation in Chinese contemporary urban cinema since the Cold War with a historical and cultural analysis. Through a research of the contents and forms of the Chinese urban cinema from 1990 to 2019, it finds that this cinema shows a process of discursive development from urban fringe to urban center, and from the under-class to the upper-class. During the 1990s, the urban space in Chinese cinema has presented a feature of narrowness and darkness, while the class identity of the space is mainly identified as the under-class people or the unemployed stratum. However, since the new century, particularly after 2013, with the economic rise of China, Chinese urban cinema has displayed a new face; filmmakers focus on demonstrating the glamorous international metropolis, and the people living in the urban space onscreen is identified as middle- and upper-class, as contemporary Chinese scholars call “the new urban cinema”. Nevertheless, “the new urban cinema” includes various cultural symptoms of economic globalization that covers the under-class and the gender wonders.

Key Words: Chinese Cinema, Cultural Studies, The Urban Generation, The New Urban Cinema

Before getting into the discussion about the significant yet ambiguous phenomenon of “Chinese urban cinema”, it is worth mentioning a martial art film which is unlikely to be deemed as “Chinese urban cinema” by scholars despite the visual landscapes are displaying extreme “urban-ness”, *Young Detective Dee: Rise of the Sea Dragon* (*Di Renjie: Shen Du Long Wang*, 2013), which became the top-grossing film in mainland Chinese film industrial history by approximate 600 million RMB (97 million dollars). In this Mainland-HK co-production, the Hong Kong director Hark Tsui successfully depicted the international metropolitan character of a pre-modern city Luoyang of Tang Dynasty (AD618-907), as shown below.



Fig.1 The urban space of pre-modern international cosmopolis Luoyang in *Young Detective Dee: Rise of the Sea Dragon*, DVD, directed by Hark Tsui (2013; Plano, US: Well Go USA, 2014).

As we can see from figure 1, in the film *Young Detective Dee*, a sequel of *Detective Dee and the Mystery of the Phantom Flame* (*Di Renjie: Tong Tian Di Guo*, 2010) which premiered three years ago, Hark Tsui has further presented the prosperous setting and fantastic image of the ancient city Luoyang. The creative team’s application of advanced 3D Fusion Camera System and post-processing audiovisual technologies Computer Graphics immeasurably to produce the urban spectacles of Luoyang as a national capital and the use of world cosmopolis. This marvellous scene of urban space by exhibiting onscreen directs us to rethink about the spectacularity of moving picture in mass culture and its function of identity-building in daily life. As what Guy Dobord observed, “The spectacle manifests itself as an enormous positivity, out of reach and beyond dispute. All it says is: ‘Everything that appears is good; whatever is good will appear.’ The attitude that it demands in principle is the same passive acceptance that it has already secured by means of its seeming incontrovertibility, and indeed by its monopolization of the realm of appearances.”¹ In the expression of urban space and cinematic technologies, is this martial art production distinct from other Chinese urban films these years?

¹ Guy Dobord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995), 15.

That doesn't just happen in a day, but can yet be regarded as a significant turn of recent Chinese urban cinema these years. Tracing back to its origin, the onscreen emergence of urban images is supposed to stem from 1990s China. Following the rapid transformations of social structure and economic system, the most Chinese filmmakers' perspectives in 1990s have changed a lot by comparing with the last generation, which is known as Fifth Generation of Chinese directors.² As in the new historical context, the 1990s director group is called the Sixth Generation. With this, the Chinese filmmakers of new generation are facing a complicated and unprecedented discourse turning in history during the rapid process of world-wide economic globalization since 1990s. As Chinese film studies scholar Yingjin Zhang said, "What makes the works of the Sixth Generation more symptomatic of postsocialism than their predecessors is their institutionally imposed but self-glorified status of marginality in a crucial turning point in postsocialism as a regime of political economy."³ The most notable feature of that is the rise of urban images on screen and off, which was named as the "Urban Generation" instead of the "Sixth Generation" by scholar Zhen Zhang, "The Urban Generation focuses on the current socio-historical conditions of production in the PRC, and on the individual directors and their works as evidentiary case studies",⁴ except feature films, lots of documentaries also deserve to be included in according to her words, both of are engaging in highlighting "the experience and conception of... 'on the scene'".⁵ At the same time, the other Chinese films scholar considered that this kind of phenomenon has been changed today, which is called the "New Urban Cinema" by Xihe Chen in 2013, "In comparison with the Urban Generation, the urban images of 'New Urban Cinema' today are depicted to be more brighter which could be able to convey a sense of ease and relaxation to audiences instead of the gray urban images and serious subject matters... By comparing with the historical epic, in 'New Urban Cinema', people who are leading in modern urban life are no longer shaped as flatlize, heroized and collectivized characters but as personalized urbanites. The personal urban emotions, experiences and troubles have become focal points rather than the grandiose narrations of nation."⁶ Admittedly, the context of modern China's great geopolitical power is reflected by reviving and redeeming its great status from history within the process of economic globalization nowadays, and Xihe Chen declared that there is a remarkable image-narrative turn occurred in contemporary

² The Fifth Generation refers to the specific group of Chinese filmmakers in 1980s whose images and narration present extremely subjective, symbolic and implied meaning by realism style of cinematography, which is completely distinct from the filmmakers of Fourth Generation, who once studied in Beijing Film Academy during the Cultural Revolution in 1960s and just starting to make films in the late 1970s for some political and historical reasons. While most Fifth Generation graduated from BFA in 1982 which included Zhang Yimou, Chen Kaige, Tian Zhuangzhuang, whose works got wide attention in Western world in 1990s.

³ Yingjin Zhang, "Rebel without a Cause? China's New Urban Generation and Postsocialist Filmmaking" in *The Urban Generation: Chinese Cinema and Society at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century*, Zhen Zhang (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007): 53

⁴ Zhang, 6

⁵ Zhang, 19

⁶ Xihe Chen, Gong Cheng, "The Rise of 'New Urban Cinema'". *Social Outlook*, no.6 (2013): 64-66

Chinese films recently years. Professedly, this recent trend of Chinese cinema can be distinctly differentiated from the “urban generation” in Zhang Zhen’s term.

Nonetheless, in the face of China’s domestic urbanizational situation with emergence of modernizational social issues, Chen’s judgment for “the rise of New Urban Cinema” set an over-optimistic tone for Chinese urban cinema which not only shaded the problematic cultural identities in contemporary Chinese cinema but also further ignored the fundamental constituent group for China’s urbanization who are ironically suffering in their contribution to the rise of China’s economy to some degree that this urban reality can hardly be seen in mass culture (it will be exemplified in the following sections). While Zhang’s conception of the “Urban generation” in 1990s, it emphasized on the historical context of the so-called “postsocialist” (in Arif Dirlik’s sense) or “post-Mao” society. As a method for periodization, it is not Znan’s individual effort to the period segmentation for Chinese cinema but has involved in the discourse turning and identification of the “Third World” intellectuals after the Cold War. Particularly the use of prefix “post-” as a sort of ideological expression indicated an indescribable and complicated situation. As a result, the more people described it by this way, the more essential problems have been given back to the “pre-” history in practice. As for Chinese film culture the 1990s is a crucial period in history, the urbanization is a portion of Chinese modernization which profited from the primitive accumulation of industrialization in the period of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) for a large degree. The causality of economical development before and after Cold War is an allimportant Chinese history project but gaped artificially since 1989’s political affair that ideological identity and its socialistic discourse become ambiguous. However, the social issues of class problem still exist in the world of which the unprecedented acuteness and neglectness, at least in China, are surpassed over the Cold War.

Whether if these two distinct discourse-orientations for Chinese urban cinema are reasonable or not, “New Urban Cinema” and the “Urban Generation” could be considered as two representative choices of visual urban spaces onscreen which revealed binary turns of class discourses in 1990s and today. This paper aims to establish a genealogy of class discourses and visual urban spaces in order to figure out the boundedness and limitations firstly, and then to elucidate the positions of urban spatial expression and class discursive narration where Chinese urban cinema actually stays in since 1990s still today. Ultimately, this paper attempts to explore the problematic dissonance of the rise of Chinese urbanization onscreen and off within the economic globalization context and the symptomatic cultural identities in the field of contemporary mass consumption culture.

Therefore, the two urban cinema discourses critiques for different kinds of historical periods can be re-considered within a specific Rectangular Coordinate System which involves the relationship between urban spaces and narrative of social classes of the “developing urban images” and “contemporary turn of urban images” in the figure as follows:

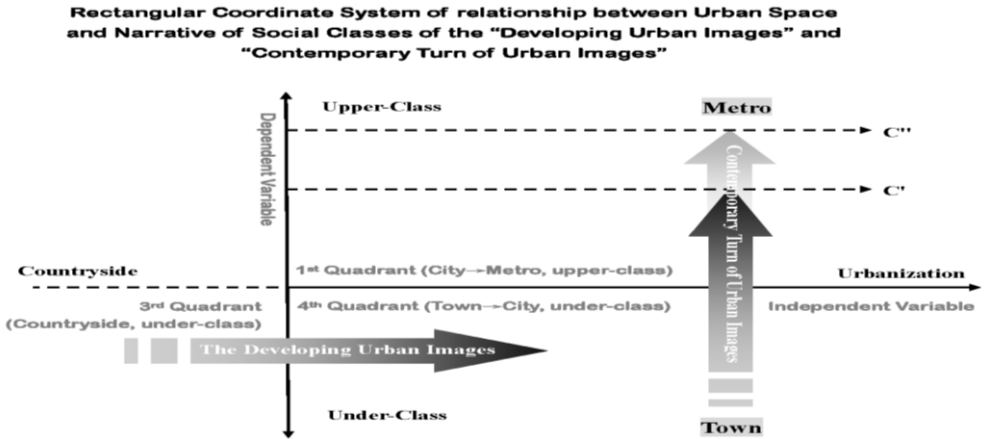


Fig. 2 The Rectangular Coordinate System of relationship between Urban Spaces and Narrative of Social Classes of the “Developing Urban Image” and “Contemporary Turn of Urban Image”.

Today, people’s life experience of modern urban space has tightly structured consumer culture and thus created hierarchical class identities which can be recognized by mass culture. British sociologist Mike Featherstone devotes considerable attention to the logical structure between social space (outer body) and individual body (inner body), in his account, “It is the appearance and management of Impressions of the outer body that is of particular interest. Within consumer culture, the inner and the outer body became conjoined: the prime purpose of the maintenance of the inner body becomes the enhancement of the appearance of the outer body.”⁷ And he asserted that the urban social space structured consumer culture and resulted in a postmodern lifestyle, “De-industrialization and the shift to cities as centers of consumption have entailed the accumulation of spectacles, mixing of codes and merging of high and low cultures, a shift towards postmodern lifestyles.”⁸ These sophisticated social spaces indeed constructed individual bodies and their identities that the ubiquitous “post-” illusion has

⁷ Mike Featherstone, “The Body in Consumer Culture”, *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 1 no. 2 (September 1982): 18-33

⁸ Mike Featherstone, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism* (New York: SAGE Publications, 1991): 150

become a footstone for contemporary capitalism stage. But how did it happen in today's China and Chinese urban cinema?

As is can be seen in figure 2, Featherstone's analytic logic of consumer culture is also valid for Chinese urban cinema. The developing-urban images have been taken on by Chinese urban cinema in 1990s and the narratives used to depict how individuals move from the 3rd Quadrant (Countryside, Lower-class) to the 4th Quadrant (Town→Metro, Lower-class). The protagonists in those films usually field to change their depressed lower-class fortune and they are still being ignored after a trans-regional movement to the end. However, the contemporary turn of urban images onscreen is to portray a new face of urban space, which represents the urbanites who are enjoying in the cross-metro and trans-national journeys. The destinations of the journeys in this Rectangular Coordinate System are infinite approaching the "super-advanced metropolis". Therefore, this kind of displacement occurs in the 1st Quadrant (City→Metro, upper-class) while the statue of characters has been changed into upper class totally.

The relationship between cinematic urban space and class status can be regarded as an inter-causality of class and urbanization in the sense of Independent-Dependent Variables (Fig.2). Then here are the further questions: How does the visual urban space function in Chinese structure of feelings since 1990s? What can be seen and not be seen in this Rectangular Coordinate System? Moreover, to what extend the identification of modern urban consumer culture in Chinese urban cinema can be shared with Western developed countries without any obstacles today?

1. FROM TOWN TO TRANS-METROPOLIS: THE SPECTACLE OF SOCIETY OF URBAN SPACES

According to the abscissa of urbanization as Independent Variable in the Rectangular Coordinate System (Fig. 2), the display of urban landscapes in Chinese urban cinema has experienced a transformation since 1990s: From town spaces to trans-metropolis spaces.

Primarily, it is indispensable to distinct the slightly ambiguous terms people used for describing various urban spaces. French sociologist Henri Lefebvre has distinguished the differences between *ville* and *urbain*, which respectively signified *town* and *city* in English words, that "Towns, cities—urban space—are the bailiwick of the discipline of urbanism."⁹ According to Lefebvre's words, the *city* was created in the process of urbanization, and the essence of city is political-ness and productiveness, that "(Social) space is a (social) product."¹⁰ The problem here is, Lefebvre regarded modern social space as a succession of medieval space,¹¹ while it is hard to say so for contemporary Chinese urban space. In other words, Lefebvre's insightful and famous conclusion was based on combing the *lengthways-inheritance* of development of

⁹ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1991): 12

¹⁰ Lefebvre, 26

¹¹ Lefebvre, 253-262

western social space, which is difficult to swallow by Chinese modern space——given that the cultural logic of onscreen Chinese urban space is just to be shown as a kind of *horizontal-transplantation* of the well-developed western urban space.

If the onscreen presentation of developing-urban images in 1990s hammered at sketching the face of *town* and its negative consequence, then the contemporary urban images of *city* is to emphasize on the positive side of capitalism which symbolizes the self-success of middle class and mobilizes modern young people to achieve self-worth in the fetishized and mammonish visual image of urban space.

In 1990s filmmakers' works, the developing-town space was usually presented as klunky and grey-colored landscape. The cross-regional movement of individual from 3rd to 4th quadrant in the Rectangular Coordinate System (Fig.2) shows how painful and insecure survival condition the urbanization imposed them on.



Fig.3 The urban images in *Postman (You Chai)*, DVD, directed by Jianjun He (1995; Guangdong, PRC: Da Sheng Wen Hua Co., 2004), *Weekend Lover (Zhou Mo Qing Ren)*, VHS, directed by Ye Lou (1995; Shanghai, PRC: Tai Seng Video, 1999), *Suzhou River (Suzhou He)*, DVD, directed by Ye Lou (2000; Culver, US: Strand Releasing, 2000)

As can be seen in figure 3, the urban spaces in these cases are shown as grey, declined and ruined visual images. But the critical paradox of development logic is that how can Chinese filmmakers have the same sense of declined and ruined urban landscapes yet the process of urbanization is *in statu nascendi* and would be soon blooming? How people regard China's 1990s urbanization as a city's decline?

In the early 1990s, the pessimistic view of urban images can be deemed as the trauma of Tiananmen Square incident by 1989. If the urbanization reflected a nation's development to some degree, then the latter is bound to be portrayed as a hopeless and declined future in spirit by Chinese independent filmmakers in this period. On the other hand, urbanization indeed plays an important role during the procedure of Chinese economic development within the context of globalization after Cold War. According to the released data from National Bureau of Statistics¹², China's urban population in 1991 has increased by 80.9% relative to 1978, and the

¹² The National Bureau of Statistics just started to engage in researching statistics of China's urbanization from 1991 by official report *China Statistical Yearbook*, (Beijing: China Statistics Press, 1991)

urbanization rate has reached at 26.94% in the same year.¹³ In many ways, the strained relationship between urban space and individual became a noticeable social issue which could not be neglected. Within this context, young directors, like Quanan Wang and Ye Lou, started to expressing this dilemma between personal condition and development of urbanization.

In director Yuan Zhang's *Mama* (*Mama*, 1990), which is well-known as the first film of the Six Generation, the urban landscape—where the leading roles, a mother and her mentally handicapped son lived in—was described as being full of crowded lane and ramshackle block. This kind of urban impress, produced the intertextuality of marginalized status between cinematic space and characters, which located in the 4th quadrant in figure 2. Other instances can be seen in the film *Beijing Bicycle* (*Shi Qi Sui Dan Che*, 2001), which portrayed the narrow Beijing Hutong.¹⁴ Director Ye Lou also represented the trash-filled and corpses-floated Suzhou River of Shanghai city in *Suzhou River*, the Shanghai urban space was shown by shaking images of handheld working and crude frames of DV imaging style to create the senses of insecurity and loss in 4th quadrant (Fig.2).

Among this generation's works, a remarkable spacial processing is to reflect the controversial China's national project, the Three Gorges Project (TGP)¹⁵ from 1994 to 2006 as well as its influences on lower-class's livelihood. The film of *Rain Clouds over Wushan* (*Wu Shan Yun Yu*, 1996), which is the first work of director Ming Zhang, narrated an ambiguous emotion between a Three Gorges signalman and a town-lodge waitress, as well as a case of resulting rape was quite difficult to be judged. Yet all the puzzled clues are unnecessary to be clarified because the place where story happened would be wiped off from map for TGP that nothing would exist to the end. In this case, all the characters were performed by amateur actors, and the Three Gorges landscape as core narrative space was presented by realistic image style. Similarly, in the documentary *Before the Flood* (*Yan Mo*, 2005), filmmaker also engaged in focusing on individual fate by highlighting the social space of Three Gorges area.

In director Zhangke Jia's work, the film *Sill Life* (2006) emphasized on showing the grey, declining small-town-like space to express how the transformation and development of urban surroundings are influencing even destroying lower-class people's livelihood by a variety of narrative perspectives.

¹³ Minxue Gao: *Study on 30 years of China Statistical Yearbook*, (Beijing: China Statistics Press, 2001): 166

¹⁴ Hutong is a kind of Beijing vernacular term, meaning ruelles, alley or lane.

¹⁵ The Three Gorges Dam is located at Yangtze River catchment in Hubei Province which full name is Three Gorges Hydroelectric Power Station. It is the largest power station in the world today. The original idea of TGP stems from Sun Yat-sen in 1919 (see Sun Yat-sen: *The International Development of China*, New York and London: Putnam Press, 1922) but never be realized for conditions of war. Until 1992, the National People's Congress approved this project. By 1994, TGP was officially enabled and finally accomplished in 2006 which conduces to national economy and the people's livelihood a lot with a sequence of social issues of urban migrant workers and ecological transformations.

The female director Ying Ning's renowned work, the series of "Beijing Trilogy" in this period is also worth paying attention to how she directed the camera to record people and their living space, "Solicits the most ordinary urban dwellers as wandering flaneurs. Following them, we led to a city in flux and urban life open to innovation. The gradual disappearance of familiar ways and the growing need to cope with a changing socioeconomic order become unavoidable in the daily lives of Beijing's residents",¹⁶ that represents different status of generations, classes, and genders.¹⁷ To some extent, it also could be able to lead us approaching the urban experience in an anthropological way of "thick description" by followed-capturing camera. The term "thick description" was created by American anthropologist Clifford Geertz, which was adapted and explored from British philosopher Gilbert Ryle's concept. In Geertz's account, "thick description" is a method of ethnographic study which should be based on the native perspective for the study of culture between subject and objective.¹⁸ I borrowed his term here is to explain how the function of Ning's camera kept the distance between her subjective perspective and the characters as observation object within Beijing urban space so as to represent the Beijing resident's various identities as follows.



Fig.4 The "thick description" way camera traced in the films *For Fun* (Zhao Le), DVD, directed by Ying Ning (1992; Indianapolis, US: Facets Studio Indianapolis, 2010); *On the Beat* (Min Jing Gu Shi), DVD, directed by Ying Ning (1995; Indianapolis, US: Facets Studio Indianapolis, 2009); *I Love Beijing* (Xia Ri Nuan Yang Yang), DVD, directed by Ying Ning (2001; Indianapolis, US: Facets Studio Indianapolis, 2008).

Her first film *For Fun* narrated a story about a retired group in Beijing city. This melodrama started with an old man's stroll in Beijing Hutong and ended by going back to his usual place. The way filmmaker showed urban space based on the elder's walking, as is shown in figure 4 (the left one), camera followed the elder's *walking-movement* for describing urban images in the early 1990s of Beijing Hutong and public parks. In her second work, *On the Beat*, citizen's *walking-movement* has changed into *riding-movement*. For example, the notable *mise-en-scène* in the beginning of this film, Ning gave a 10min long take for recording a conversation between

¹⁶ Shuqin Cui, "Ning Ying's Beijing Trilogy: Cinematic configurations of Age, Class, and sexuality" in Zhang, Zhen ed, *The Urban Generation: Chinese Cinema and Society at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007): 243

¹⁷ Cui, 242

¹⁸ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, US: Basic Books Press, 1973): 361-364.

two policemen who are crossing the main streets of Beijing by riding bicycle. Meanwhile it also recorded the developing urban spaces, which can be read as the face of the process of Beijing urban demolition for reconstruction in figure 4 (the middle one). What's more, in her last production of "Beijing Trilogy", *I Love Beijing*, the *riding-movement* has evolved to *auto-movement*, and the urban space has also changed into high-rise buildings instead of Beijing Hutong or restructuring blocks in figure 4 (the right one). In this film, the protagonist was set into a taxi driver who has to cross Beijing city day and night. Camera thus successfully recorded Beijing urban images before and after millennium by following the view of which the taxi driver held, catching the sight of what he saw, experiencing how he lived—which also coincided with the audience's visual angle.

Alonging with China's economic increasingly growth since the world subprime crisis in 2007, Beijing's successful hosting of the 2008 Olympics and China became the second largest economy in 2010, the onscreen urban images has taken a big turn in contemporary Chinese urban films. Nowadays, it reversed the grey and depressed expression off into a bright and optimistic face. The storytelling way also has turned from 4th quadrant into 1st quadrant (Fig. 2). Therefore, the displayed urban space transformed town into metropolis that the selected screenshots are shown below.



Figure. 5 The turn of urban images can be seen in these cases, *You Are the One* (Fei Cheng Wu Rao), DVD, directed by Xiaogang Feng (2008; Shanghai, PRC: Tai Seng Video, 2009); *Go LA LA Go!* (Du Lala Sheng Zhi Ji), DVD, directed by Jinglei Xu (2010; Beijing: China Film Group Corporation, 2010); *Tiny Times 1.0* (Xiao Shi Dai 1.0), DVD, directed by Jingming Guo (2010; Hong Kong, HK of PRC: Edko Films Ltd., 2010).

In the very beginning of these films before storytelling, filmmakers used to employ the aerial cinematography with bright luster and gay colors to present the magnificent and fashionable urban appearances as the Independent Variable in abscissa, which set the upper-class tone on the Dependent Variable in ordinate (Fig. 2). As it can be seen in figure 5 above, the film *You Are the One* depicted a male-single man's dramatic marriage-seeking experience (the left one). In this case, the way of narrative-syntagms transitions before showing his dating stories is to present metropolitan consume of urban landscapes. The camera invariably framed the auto-flyovers, upscale mansions and other highly modernized urban spectacles into various panoramas, and so did the opening scenes in *Go LaLa Go!*. In the latter case (the middle one), before the title emerging, filmmaker dedicated in showing the highly economic developed degree of Beijing CBD (Central Business District) by the similar shooting and editing. In the "Tiny Times series", whether the *Tiny Times 1.0* (the right one in Fig. 4), *Tiny Time 2.0* (2013), *Tiny Time 3.0* (2014),

Tiny Time 4.0 (2015) and *The Return of the Exes* (2017), filmmakers changelessly portrayed the bourgeois urbanities of metropolitan Shanghai by multifarious aerial cinematographies and special effects technologies. This type of urban films can be seen every year with high box-office in mainland China, such as *My Belle Boss* (*Wo De Mei Nü Lao Ban*, 2010), *Sleepless Fashion* (*Yu Shi Shang Tong Ju*, 2011), *I Do* (*Wo Yuan Yi*, 2012), *One Night Surprise* (*Yi Ye Jing Xi*, 2013) and *EX-Files* (*Qian Ren Gong Lue*, 2014).

Beyond doubt, the distinction of the choices of visual urban spaces between the Chinese urban cinema in 1990s and contemporary works is quite evident. Most Six Generation works could not be only named as “independent films” but also be regarded as “underground films” because of the release channel pertained to independent production without official permission. Therefore, in the sense of ideological content, Six Generation’s films were inclined to represent the gloomy, blank and declining towns as well as the off-mainstream identities. This kind of urban space, as a metaphor of “underground city” in 4th quadrant, plays an important visual role of Independent Variable of “urbanization” (Fig. 2), which signifies the lower class of social realities as the Dependent Variable of “class”. While in recent years, Attributing to the rise of China’s economic since 2007 global financial crisis, a significant creative change has come to contemporary Chinese urban cinema. Most films with great cast, advanced special effects and photographic technologies, are produced for getting marketing profits as much as possible. These commercial films are made by over-ground channels that urban space used to be shaped as an over-ground figure of being full of the flashy, vibrant and highly praised bourgeois aesthetic taste.

Consequently, as is depicted in 1st quadrant (Fig. 2), the commercially successful Chinese urban cinema is increasingly imperative to present the feature of the *trans-metropolitan* which is obvious exist in the popular Chinese urban film series. In the first series of *If You Are the One* in 2008, the Chinese popular director Xiaogang Feng focused on delineating Beijing, Suzhou and other beauteous urban landscapes of mainland China, while in the next production *If You Are the One 2* by 2010, the protagonists started to commence a transnational journey from Beijing of China to Hokkaido city of Japan. In director Jinglei Xu’s first commercial transition film, *Go LaLa Go!* (2010),¹⁹ the story is about how a Beijing urban white-collar female struggled from an ordinary staff of a huge corporation, which is one of the global top 500 enterprises, to become a HR supervisor (human resource supervisor) as a mid-level executive. However, in her second urban film *Dear Enemy* (2011), the narrative background has moved to London of United Kingdom, Chengdu of China and Sydney of Australia.

¹⁹ The filmmaker Jinglei Xu of this film, used to be a famous actress in China whose performing career started in 1996. She directed her first debut *My Father and I* by 2002 which focuses on the parent-child issue in Chinese single-parent family. In 2004, she created her second melodrama *A Letter from an Unknown Woman* which is adapted from Stefan Zweig’s novel. In 2006, her third work *Dreams May Come* is a kind of experimental film with low budget, which aims to discuss the relationship between individual’s dream and reality, there are only four characters and one main scene in the story. By 2010, the film *Go LaLa Go!* is her fourth directorial work as well as the transition. After that, she devotes into commercial productions.

Protagonists used to shift back and forth between these metropolises in the story. Meanwhile the heroine's status has been improved into a higher level of class as an investment adviser. Another instance of this is the series of *Sophie's story*. In the initial production, *Sophie's Revenge* (Fei Chang Wan Mei, 2009), the female cartoonist lived in an unknown Chinese fashionable urban space which was full of Europe style buildings and modern home decorations. In the later series, *My Lucky Star* (Fei Chang Xing Yun, 2012), the setting of Sophie's romantic experience has transferred to Singapore.

At this point, referring again to the figure 2, the relationship between urban spaces and narrative of social classes of Chinese urban films in 1990s and contemporary productions can be distinctly seen in the "Rectangular Coordinate System" in previous components. The choices of visual urban images in Chinese films have undergone a process of being from town to trans-metropolis as Independent Variable in the Coordinate System, which leads to the transformation of discourse of being from the level of low-class into middle-class towards the everlasting upper-class.

2. FROM LOWER-CLASS TO UPPER-CLASS: THE CLASS IDENTITIES OF MARGIN AND MAINSTREAM

Moving on the class identities as "Dependent Variable" in the Rectangular Coordinate System (Fig.2) after a investigation of urbanization as Independent Variable above, it is self-evident that the narrative of social classes in 1990s' and contemporary Chinese urban films are in stark contrast within different contexts. The turn of representing urban space on screen has undergone a process: The filmmakers shifted urban spaces away from marginal town towards to the metropolis in the center of the world. It is embodied in the narrative structures that the value standpoints of protagonists in Chinese urban films depend on *who* are occupying *which* location of viewing perspective and having *what* kind of class discourse.

To begin with, the 1990s Chinese urban films used to focus on the lower class which situates in the marginal urban space in the 4th quadrant (Fig.2) and contextually relate to China's social reality of urbanization as well as people's livelihood.

The rise of Chinese residents' income level is far less to national economic growth since the unprecedentedly rapidly increase of urbanization: In 1985, the resident income accounted for 56.2% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), after that, this rate constantly declined and reached to the bottom in 1995 by 47.1%²⁰. This period of resident-income change was dovetail with the emergence of Chinese urban cinema and the Six Generation. To a large extent, the 1990s Chinese urban cinema devoted to record the gap between the social development along with

²⁰ Actually, this figure in 2005 has fallen down to the same situation in 1978. See Guangyang Huang, "The resident income of national income distribution since the reformation of china's economy", *Northern Economic* (No.22, 2012): 7

national economy, and the individual situation accompanied with personal feeling, which can be shown as lived experiences of marginal group in the developing town spaces.

Yuan Zhang's second directorial film *Beijing Bastards* (*Beijing Za Zhong*, 1993) filled with sexploitation, profanities, alcoholomania and drug-addiction of next generation who lived in the lower class of Beijing city. In director Zhangke Jia's *Pickpocket* (*Xiao Wu*, 1997), identity of the hero was set into a thief who strolled in rural-urban fringe zone all the days. While the leading character of Jia's another film *Xiao Shan Going Home* (*Xiao Shan Hui Jia*, 1998) is a jobless who was just fired by restaurateur boss before Chinese Spring Festival. Similarly, the protagonists in the films *In Expectation* and *Still Life* were respectively set into signalman (or a suspect rapist) and coalminer whose identities are marginalized by mainstream society.

Referring the China's urbanization as Independent Variable in the Rectangular Coordinate System (Fig.2), the "bottom narration" came into focus in 1990s Chinese urban films, which used to be framed into depressed and dreadful urban images. The marginal group, criminals, prostitutes and homosexuals, who are out of the mainstream-social-patriarchal system, thus were shown up into the limelight onscreen this period.

Today, the social situation and international condition have been changed a lot superficially. In contemporary Chinese urban films, mass consumer culture becomes the principal character of urban image that the identifications of class-narrative subject were transformed from marginal status towards the upper-class imagination.

On account of the world-spread financial crisis since 2007, China became America's principal creditor by 2008, and has surpassed Japan as world's second largest economy in the year of 2010. Further, China still exists as a developing country status in the world (or the other politically ambiguous term today, the 'Third World') and ranks the 99th in GDP per person. Ironically, contemporary Chinese urban cinema is no longer engaging in reflecting the social reality today. The middle-class narration and the consuming desires upper-class in Chinese films have revealed the recognitions of values of current Chinese people: To pursue the grandiose metropolitan consume culture as well as the sense of "being a citizen-member of a Western developed country", which reckless disregards the distinct paradox between national economy and people's livelihood. Particularly the latter one, which is suffering avoidless economic exploitations not only by satisfying the demand of the domestic economic development but for making a lot of international economic compromises under external pressure within the context of capitalism globalization. However, from underground production to aboveground creation, the global-capitalism cultural logic is embodied in the gorgeous urban images of bourgeois urbanity and legitimizing identity of upper class, which have deeply structured in the process of film making.

Actually, the financial sponsor is the real storyteller who leads the discourse of culture hegemony behind the scenes. "In-film advertising" becomes an increasingly popular mode of product placement in contemporary Chinese urban films. In *If You Are the One*, there are

dozens of business brands as “in-film ad” which occupied more than half of aggregate investment of the film. As for *Esquire Runway* (Shi Shang Xian Sheng, 2008), it shows the special caption as “In celebration for 15 anniversary of *Cosmopolitan*²¹ magazine” before the film begins. Also the film *Color Me Love* (Ai Chu Se, 2010) got dozens of sponsors from the brands of Hermes, Cartier, GUCCI, Versace and other more than 20 world-renowned luxury companies. In *My Belle Boss*, one of heroine’s dressing clothes could be worth hundreds of millions dollar...Much less the “Tiny Times series”, it is not only as known as a prosperously popular production in the film field but swooned by numerous “Tiny Times” fans in the fields of novels, TV shows and comics. As what the producer said, “We tend to build the industrial chain, like the ‘Harry Potter series’, to make the ‘Tiny Times’ being the foremost brand in mass culture.”²²

Following the impulse of capitalistic logic in film industry, contemporary Chinese urban cinema thus has formed a certain stereotypical melodrama pattern: The middle-class protagonists’ urban adventures and romantic tales of trans-metropolis towards upper-class. In *Go Go LaLa Go!*, when the heroine has successfully strived her occupational identity from an executive secretary with 3000 RMB monthly into a sales director secretary and even began dating with her rich and handsome boss (boyfriend). After that, she said, “I couldn’t be your secretary all my life for I wanna pursue my personal career goals.” After this narrative segment, it was cut to a close-up of a recruitment bulletin: “Internal competition: HR Supervisor”. The same narrative structure can be also seen in *Color Me Love*, “Tiny Times series” and any other contemporary Chinese urban films which have been mentioned in previous section. In this regard, this kind of melodrama pattern is to weave an urban tale that how the middle-class urbanites capably struggle for a glamorous the upper-class lifestyle with their desirable love harvest.

Besides, people’s status is defined by urban space profoundly today. As American sociologist Anthony M. Orum believed, the essence of cities is to resent the places which are locating our statuses and positions.²³ The urban space in films is embellished into a resplendent, magnificent even illusory appearance. This phenomenon of Chinese contemporary urban cinema is not a kind of simple complicity with global capitalistic consumer cultural logic but encodes into a specific cultural logic of new-reborn socialist state with value recognition of capitalism during the process of China’s sharply urban and economic rises since 1990s. It is exactly to be shown as the image of ancient metropolis Luoyang by figure 1 in the beginning of this paper, as the

²¹ *Cosmopolitan* is a series of high-end magazines and sponsored by National Tourism Administration and China Tourism Association, which themed current fashion and was founded in 1993.

²² Jie Zhang, “Guo Jingming has received CNY300 million in making ‘Tiny Times series’”, *Western China Metropolis Daily* (2001-12-17)

²³ Anthony M. Orum and Xiangming Chen, *The World of Cities : Places in Comparative and Historical Perspective* (Hoboken: Wiley Press, 2003): 3-16

representation of contemporary urban image, which expresses the structure of feeling of great rejuvenation of Chinese nation in significant measure.

Within this context, urban space (metropolis) and urbanite (middle-upper class) are strongly to be identified *to be fashionable* in the 1st quadrant (Fig.2). As a method of class division, as in Georg Simmel's term, "Fashion differentiates one time from another and one social stratum from another. It unites those of a social class and segregates them from others...it characterizes the female and the middle class."²⁴ Whether people and cities they live in have the property of *fashionability* or not, it is not only to be regarded as a kind of judgment for the height-level class identity, but also to be a visual metaphor of a potential economic identification of the fact that today's China is the first in world's luxury goods consumption. For examples, the narrations of *Esquire Runway*, *Love In Cosmo* (Yao Bai De Hun Yue, 2010), *Sleepless Fashion* and the three productions of "Tiny Time series" are all about the work experiences of middle-class protagonists in fashion magazine companies. Above all, the class identities of these middle-class protagonists have undergone a one-way flow in 1st quadrant (Fig.2) from middle class towards a higher level of upper class with the display of gender performativity of a fashionable female body.

A new problem has arisen here: How do the urban tales could be described as only one-way-flow model? What have been covered and rewritten in the respects of gender and class behind? However, the choices of visual urban images, have changed from negative aspect of urban space of developing urbanization as what 1990s Chinese filmmakers concentrated on, into a positive face of well-developed metropolis within the consumerism culture value today. In contemporary Chinese urban cinema, the lower-class people who lie in 3rd and 4th quadrants (Fig.2) are consequently stayed in silent and unseen. Instead of this, the narrative rhetoric of urban life is described as inspirational story of young generation. In other words, the most two crucial elements of contemporary Chinese urban cinema are *successful career* and *romantic love* narratives within the middle-class discourse system. The former related to *class narration* about being into the *symbolic* in the sense of Jacques Lacan by which the lower class is covered and rewritten. Basing on the former, the latter can be deemed as a kind of *gender narration* which codes female body into a patriarchy social system as well as their cultural values.

3. THE BOTTOM AND "CHICK FLICK": ISSUES OF SOCIAL-CLASS REALITY AND GENDER VALUES AS RESIDUAL DEBTS IN CHINESE URBAN CINEMA ONSCREEN AND OFF

In the beginning of 2012, the urbanization rate of China was released by NBS showed that it has been reached at 52%. It seems that contemporary Chinese urban cinema is reasonably to establish a fire-new narrative model with the turn of cultural perspective to shape the *consumability* and *fashionability* of metropolitan space so as to create a legitimate space for

²⁴ Georg Simmel, "Fashion", *The American Journal of Sociology* (Vol. 62, No.6, May, 1957): 541-558

urbanite's displacement from middle towards upper class. However, another data from an investigation report by Tsinghua University in the next year revealed the realistic social situation as long-term and residual debt, have been accumulated along with the process of China's urbanization: "There is only no more than 27.6% of Chinese household registration of urbanization rate."²⁵ At the present time, "One of the main features of urbanization is the migration from countryside to assemble in city, namely the process of citizenization of famer status."²⁶ That is to say, the urban-rural binary structural contradiction is still a kind of fundamental social reality of today's China since 1990s.

It needs to be clarified about the aforementioned critiques on the neglect of off-1st quadrant (Fig.2) in contemporary Chinese urban cinema here. Those are by no means that only releasing the residual debts for exposing the dark side of the social space onscreen can be worthy of praising and commending. Indeed, the well-developed Chinese metropolis also constitutes the rapidly increasing process of urbanization and economic success. The problem of the choice of visual-urban space and class-narrative model in contemporary Chinese cinema, is to be shown as one-dimensionality, closeness and exclusiveness (which also existed in the Six Generation's underground works in 1990s). As a matter of fact, no matter how the reports of China's urban data or the world sociologists contribute to urban studies for global cities, the more higher of internationalization, the more quantity of color-blocks by the face of *urban mosaic*, as Duncan Timms goes, the actual appearance of urban ecology should be seemed as urban mosaic, which are composed by several sub-communities.²⁷ In modern context, various urban spaces, such as village-in-city, societies-of-occupations, and migrant-workers-communities, are shaping different color-blocks of urban mosaic, which could not be ignored as basic inner components of Chinese metropolitan cultural style, of which the bourgeois consumer culture is just one. Yet these *parti-colors* of urban mosaics today are unified into one exclusive *golden-color* or being disappeared within the context of global economic integration and Chinese economic miracle in new millennium.

In contemporary Chinese urban cinema, most inspirational urban stories occur in the 1st quadrant, which used to narrate audience how the protagonists struggle from the bottom on the Dependent Variable to the unlimited higher-upper class with the transformation of cities on the Independent Variable (Fig.2). While the bottom group, the lower class and the countryside or developing urban space in the 3rd and 4th quadrants, were squeezed out of the *symbolic* and then fell into the *real* (Lacan's terms) which could no longer be seen and heard.

²⁵ China Data Center of Tsinghua University (CDC), "Initial Investigation Report Investigation of China's Urbanization" (Press Conference, October 2013)

²⁶ Ping Liang, "Dean of the School of Social Science of Tsinghua University Li, Qiang: The Core of Urbanization is the Citizenization of Famer", *Green Living* (No.4, Vol. 52, 2013): 26

²⁷ Duncan Timms, *The Urban Mosaic: Towards a Theory of Residential Differentiation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971): 3

One good example of this, is the new description for class division in the script of the film *Go LaLa Go!*, which contributes to our understanding for how the class identification has been completely rewritten today: “In our corporation as one of enterprises of the Fortune Top 500, the alleged *petty bourgeoisie* refers to such people, whose positions are under managers and monthly salary would be no more than 4000 RMB, namely *the poor*; while the people of managers can be regarded as *middle class*, who own private cars and annual salary should surpass 200 thousands RMB; people of directors are the *upper class*, whose annual salary will be over 500 thousands RMB; the presidents, whose annual salary could reach at millions RMB, are the only *rich*.” This monologue in the film revealed that there is no narrative field of the bottom by rewriting the *class*.

Moving on the big-hit inspirational film *American dreams in China* (*Zhong Guo He Huo Ren*, 2013), which is adapted from a true story of the birth of a well-known and popular educational institution for English study in China. It describes how the 3 undergraduate students start running an educational institution from a local company in 1980s and develop it into an international quoted company. In this film, the meaning of individual success is assumed to get the upper class identity whatever it is so-called China dream or American one. The point is concentrated on the end of the film when the name and images of Chuanzhi Liu, Yun Ma, Lan Yang, Kaifu Li, Shi Wang²⁸ and other successful businessmen and celebrities of upper crust, emerged on screen one by one with the title: “Their stories are also yours.” Videlicet, these texts and images here can be read as a Foucauldian discourse analysis: The most significant discourse is the *age* (today) of narrating the tales of Chinese capitalists rather than the *age* (since 1980s) in the narration of the tales of Chinese capitalist.

Also in the *Tiny Times 1.0*, according to the actor’s lines, the filmmakers’ understanding of poverty is “...Nothing more than to do couple of portrait sketches for the passerby on street.” Meanwhile, the image of rich-second-generation is depicted as a genius of international finance and “Not just the luxuries in mind”. This type of class-rewriting not only simplified the bottom narration but rationalized the status of upper class.

Back to reviewing the residual debts within the China’s urbanization, it could be also regarded as the cost of lower class for the Chinese economic miracle of new age: The proportion of resident income of GDP in 2005 has decreased under the date in 1978 (41.8%), and the rate of Per Capita Disposable (PCD) in 1978 was 90.1% but has fallen into 63.7% by 2010.²⁹ In the presence of severe social realities and growing class contradictions these years, the contemporary Chinese urban cinema contrary takes on the keynote of eulogizing the values of cultural consumerism and the coming of economic capitalism.

²⁸ Chuanzhi Liu, chief executive of Lenovo Group Ltd; Yun Ma, founder of Chinese firms for network transaction, like Alibaba Group, Taobao and AliPay; Lan Yang, famous media player and philanthropist; Kaifu Li, founder of investment institution Innovation Works; Shi Wang, founder of China Vanke.

²⁹ See note 20 above.

The resolution strategy, as what has been mentioned above, is to rewrite the class narration by various narrative rhetorics, which fundamentally is the identical self-integration of middle and upper classes themselves. Besides, this rewriting is also a modification for living reality and imaging aesthetic appreciation of audiences themselves. The urban space and class narration thus are limited into 1st quadrant (Fig.2) and the other discourse fields in the 3rd and 4th quadrants stay in being closed consequently. To some extent, this choice of visual urban space and class narration is a kind of over-rhetoric by de-variegating other classes. Finally, consumeristic metropolitan space and middle-class female body are fetishized.

Basing on the middle-upper classes narration, the centralized portraying of fashionable urban female body in contemporary Chinese urban films has literally given birth to the other film genre, “chick flick”, which coincides with urban inspirational story in the 1st quadrant (Fig.2).

As an American genre, “chick flick” stems from the 1961 film *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*, which describes “A group of mostly American and British popular culture media forms focused primarily on twenty-tothirty something middle-class women.”³⁰ In contemporary Chinese “chick flick”, urban space becomes the indispensable narrative field, into which the struggle of young generation, individual-success achievement and urban consumer culture are weaved. According to one of my studies,³¹ the first Chinese “chick flick” film is *Sophie’s Revenge* which was born in 2009. This case can be deemed as a typical proof that Chinese cinema has the “chick flick” genre producing capability and consuming ability. And the director Yimeng Jin, who has ever studied the major of film-making in the US, consciously imitated the model of American “chick flick” genre in her latter works.

Reviewing contemporary Chinese urban films from gender perspective, the phenomenon of “chick flick” can not be neglected. Most of them used to narrate a tale that how a young lady struggle herself to gain the successful middle (upper)-class career as well as romantic love when they hold a positive attitude to her own urban life. For instance, *Go LaLa Go!* describes an inspiring story about how an ordinary girl who works in a multinational corporation strived from a trainee in the beginning and to become a senior executive in the end. The theme of *Sophie’s Revenge* is “In urban life, only finding herself can a woman gain her true love”. *Love is Not Blind* (Shi Lian 33 Tian, 2011) is about how a lovelorn girl who lives and works in Beijing rebuilt her self-confidence and started to a new life. In this way, what urban life means to these young-female-middleclass workers? Comparing the period of the birth of American “chick flick”, of which the so-called “golden age” in post-war economic resurrection,³² it can

³⁰ Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young ed. *Chick flicks : contemporary women at the movies* (London: Routledge, 2007): 1

³¹ Yishui Chen: “The Rise of the Sacred Urban: Discussing the Urban Space and Discourse Turn of the so-called New Urban Cinema”, *Contemporary Cinema* (Vol. 4, No.214, 2014): 151-153

³² The birth of the film *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* was created in the year of 1961, which is marked the rise of American “chick flick”. While the period of “golden age” for post-war economic resurrection of the US was from 1961 to 1971, in which American GNP has increased from 5233 to 10634 billion dollar.

be seen that the time point Chinese “chick flick” films spring up on screen is the rise of China’s economy after global financial crisis since 2007. In other words, the appearance of “chick flick” natively associated with the rise of a nation (or a region)’s economy. Hence, the aesthetic culture of “chick flick” films certainly embodies bourgeois consumerism culture through the female body.

In contemporary Chinese urban cinema particularly the “chick flick”, female body is highlighted onscreen which involves in gender aesthetics in middle-class male gaze and fetishistic fashionability of urban consumer culture. In the film *Love on Credit* (Xing Fu E Du, 2011), Chinese famous actress Chi-ling Lin used to perform in the clothing of fashionable style and in the urban spaces of senior clubs. The international Chinese actress Ziyi Zhang, led a middle-class urbanism life in the incredible urban space of European architectural style in *Sophie’s Revenge*. Also in *Go LaLa Go!*, the celebrated mainland-China actress and director Jinglei Xu, and the well-known Hong Kong songstress and actress Karen Mok, constantly dressed various models of designer clothes up onscreen. It is manifest that the gender spectacle and fashion consuming have associated together by female bodies of star actresses.

A number of Chinese film studies scholars have noticed the appearance of Chinese “chick flick” yet optimistically regarded it as a mark of self-confidence and independent-women figure of new urban Chinese female. Indeed, it seems that heroines in Chinese “chick flick” show to be more proactive for their life onscreen. Nevertheless, the permanent patriarchal rule is still dominating the game regulation of gender power relations. In other words, women did not get real independent onscreen, but also being re-structured into the *male gaze* in the sense of Laura Mulvey by a set of urban consumer cultural logic.

The female bodies, wrapped with fashionable clothing of world famous brand in the so-called “chick flick” genre, are re-packaged by urban consumer culture which is the representative of global capitalist culture. As in the following, the viewpoint of spectator, the male gaze and the perspective of camera, are welded into one to gaze the fashion-orientation female bodies, which turn out to peeping at the urban space, life and tales in the 1st quadrant (Fig.2) with ambitions and desires of middle-upper class. Within the context of economic rise of China, the onscreen images of urban space become more and more shinier as well as the figures of Chinese female. By being so, how filmmakers and film studies scholars attempt to deal with and figure out the relationship between gender power and capital logic in the age of consumption? What role does feminism achievements of Chinese modern women’s liberation movement play in mass culture today? Or does it function today? Further, how does the lower-class women who stay in the other quadrants (the 3rd and 4th in Fig.2) be hidden behind the back of the golden-metropolitan urban space?

4. CONCLUSION

There is a clear class-discourse venation of Chinese urban cinema since 1990s can be seen according to the Rectangular Coordinate System in figure 2, different choices of visual urban

images as the Independent Variable “urbanization”, could give rise to the disparate narration of social class as Dependent Variable. This transformation signifies that the urban space and class discourse onscreen happened displacements of being from margin towards the center. The 1990s Chinese urban cinema described the semi-urban regions and focused on the people who lived in marginal developing urban space in 3rd quadrant and 4th quadrant (Fig.2), which revealed the social issues in the period of market economy reform. But in contemporary urban films, following the context of the rise of China’s economy after 2007, most Chinese filmmakers lost their interests in representing the semi-urban regions. Their cameras are burning concerned about the consumptionity and fashionability of metropolis and the middle-upper class lifestyles instead of the lower class. As a result, the urban space is portrayed as the positive, optimistic and hopeful image.

Admittedly, the rise of new Chinese urban cinema brought the surprising well-developed Chinese film industry in recently years and explored vast potential for future development. However, what I attempt to figure out is the cultural symptom in these productions, that how urban images and class discourses are represented as one-dimensional narration of middle class like that? How are the film makers and scholars aware of it consciously today? Above all, In what extend contemporary Chinese urban cinema is sharing the same consumer cultural value with Western developed countries without any civilized or ideological gaps? Or, to which degree the social realities can be successfully rewritten into the golden bourgeois urban tales?

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